

*Harman Singh Shan*

# A SIKH KING

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## THE SIKH HISTORY STUDY CIRCLE

The Sikh History Study Circle has been organised with a view to familiarising the Sikhs and Non-Sikhs with the glorious Sikh achievements in their chequered History. It is unfortunate that with the lapse of time, many of these glorious pages are now enveloped in a veil of mist. The Sikh History Circle's objective is to tear this veil. To this end, the Circle has started with the publication of two pamphlets, entitled "Guru Gobind Singh" by Principal Teja Singh and 'A Sikh King' by S. Sardul Singh Caveeshar. The Circle proposes to hold a Conference of Sikh Scholars and students of Sikh History in order to chalk out the lines on which this work is to be carried on. The Circle would seek the Co-operation of one and all who are interested in this noble work.

*S. B. College Karol Bagh  
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*31 August, 1952*

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"Bachan"

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# A Sikh King

(By. S. Sardul Singh Caveeshar)

It were the Sikhs who liberated the Punjab and through Punjab India, from the oppression and misrule of the Moghals and Afghans. As such most of their work was from the very nature of the circumstances, destructive ; their main efforts had to be directed to demolishing the edifice of loot and tyranny built in the Punjab by weak and incompetant descendants of Babar and other freebooters from Afghanistan. Early Sikhs could produce heroes but they could not produce great rulers or administrators. It was quite late in their history, about three hundred years after Guru Nanak, that Ranjit Singh became the ruler of the Punjab and the Sikhs gave India a great ruler and an abic administrator. The lion of the Punjab, as Ranjit Singh was called both by the English and the Russians, was certainly not an ideal Sikh, but he was a Sikh all the same, and as such, no doubt, a ruler who stood head and shoulder high amongst those who belonged to his class.

When Ranjit Singh was born the Punjab was almost free from the misrule of the Delhi Emperors ; but still the fear of Afghan freebooters was there. Abdalis

durrani and Ghilzais, had made the Punjab their annual looting ground, and it was with great difficulty that the various Sikhs and Muslim chiefs who ruled the Punjab during those days could protect their people from the attacks of these invaders. The population of the Punjab in those days was about twelve millions, and there were about thirty chiefs who ruled over the province. These petty governors were jealous of each other; they fought amongst themselves like beasts of the jungle; thus disunited, they could not defend the Punjab from the attacks of the superior and well organised forces that visited the country every year from the Afghan borders.

The first thing that Ranjit Singh did was to unite the whole of the Punjab into one Kingdom. Except this there was no remedy to end the internecine quarrels and foreign aggression. The Lahore Chaudhris, Headmen, Hindus and Muslims, being tired of and foreign governors who followed each other like gusts of wind, invited him from Gujranwala to Lahore and entrusted to him the keys of the twelve gates of Lahore. Thus was Ranjit Singh elected by people's representatives to rule over the whole of the Punjab.

The Punjabis loved him as their father, and he looked after their needs as one does of his children. At his death there was no eye, Hindu, Muslim or Sikh that was not wet. This is the testimony of all the writers of the time, Indian and foreign.

In order to unite the Punjab into one Kingdom, Ranjit Singh had to wage constant war against his opponents during the whole of his life. Not only the Hindus and the Moslem chiefs were brought under his sway, but even the Sikh chiefs had to bow before him. The well-known Sikh confederacy consisting of twelve Misals or chieftainships had to be welded into one Kingdom. But during all this time Ranjit Singh did not kill a single man with his own sword and did not allow a single man from amongst his enemies to be killed when brought as a captive. It is a singular fact in the whole of human history that a man who had to wage so many battles to consolidate a Kingdom, did not kill and would not kill outside the battle field a single man from amongst his opponents however fiercely or treacherously they had fought against him.

The reason is not difficult to find. Ranjit Singh though a great warrior loved his people not the less. Time after time he was advised to make an end of those whom he had subdued and from danger of revolt and intrigue was inevitable. Instances would be cited from history, laws would be quoted from the codes of political morality ; but he was always adamant against such advice. He went even further : he abolished capital punishment altogether. He was perhaps the first ruler who had set an example in reforming the penal laws in this direction ; no cold blooded murder of personal enemies, political antagonists, or even ordinary criminals would be tolerated.

By his success as a ruler and as an administrator he established the political and legal convention that persons who had gone radically wrong should rather be reformed than destroyed. He had to bring under him about twenty big chiefs ; the number of small Nawabs and Sardars whom he had to deprive of ruling powers was very large. By his sympathetic treatment of them he made almost all of them his allies ; a great part of his conquests was due mainly to the loyalty and friendship those whom he had conquered both politically and morally. His success in this respect was more brilliant than of all those of the old school who believed in nothing but the assassination of their rivals and opponents.

Ranjit Singh hated taking the life of man. In the field of criminal law this policy proved of greater benefit to society than any results which could be claimed by the supporters of capital punishment. The number of heinous crimes in the kingdom of Maharaja Ranjit Singh was far less than in any other country at the time. Along with capital punishment, the Maharaja abolished also other corporal punishments like the cutting of hands, ears or nose of the criminals as was allowed by the laws of those days in almost all other countries. It is on record that the new reform did not affect the peace of the Punjab in any adverse manner ; the country under Ranjit Singh was certainly more peaceful than any other part of India at the time, and crime was less prevalent than anywhere else.

Ranjit Singh's sympathy with his subjects was supreme. The Governorship of Kashmir once fell vacant. Kashmir was one of Ranjit Singh's richest provinces, and its Governorship was regarded as a prize post. Sardar Hari Singh Nalwa and Maharaja Ranjit Singh's most favourite general. Not only was the Sardar a bold and clever Commander, he was also a personal friend of the Maharaja. He belonged to the Gujranwala District where Ranjit Singh was born, and when boys, Ranjit Singh and Hari Singh had played and lived together as two chums. The Maharaja ordered that Hari Singh be appointed as a Governor of Kashmir. When the other responsible courtiers heard of the order, there was a stir amongst them. They admitted Hari Singh's worth as a great general, but they had not the same faith in him as an administrator ; they regarded him as a reckless spendthrift and as such an exacting and even inconsiderate civil officer. Faqir Aziz Din, the Foreign Minister, objected to the appointment and even used harsh words in criticising the order of appointment. He said that if Hari Singh were to go to Kashmir as Governor, there should also be sent a batch of ploughs with him to level the flourishing towns of the Kashmir valley to the ground. Ranjit Singh at once withdrew his orders and deputed a more sympathetic person to look after the administration of Kashmir.

The story also indicates how patient Ranjit Singh was of criticism ; it is a virtue which is seldom met among rulers and kings.

Ranjit Singh's sympathies were not confined to this or that community. It may look strange, but it is a fact that though only a short while before the Sikhs were engaged in a life and death struggle with the Moslems, when Ranjit Singh, or for the matter of that, the Sikhs came into power, feelings between the two communities became so cordial as were never before.

Moslems, Hindus, {Sikhs and even Europeans, held under Ranjit Singh the most responsible posts without any distinction of race, caste, or creed. His Prime Minister was a Hindu Rajput, the Foreign Minister a Persian Moslem, and the Finance Minister a Pandit from Kashmere. Though the army mainly-consisted of Sikhs, it had Moslems, Hindus and Christians holding posts of Colonels and Generals. Ilahi Bakhsh, a Purbia Muslim, was in charge of the artillery, and General Court, a French nobleman, was in charge of the Europeanised section of the army. Even in Ranjit Singh's household Hindus and Moslems were as great favourites as the Sikhs.

Ranjit Singh made education free and universal amongst his subjects. According to Lethbridge, a Director of Public Instruction in the Punjab under the British, there were proportionately more literates in the Punjab under Ranjit Singh's rule, than anywhere else in India at that time, or even a long time after when the Punjab became a British possession. Dharamshalas and Pathshalas of the Hindus and Mosques and Maktibs of



the Moslems were liberally endowed by Ranjit Singh. Though himself illiterate, it was his passion to see amongst his subjects men like Plato, Aristotle, Valmiki and Vyasa.

The Sikh King was extremely simple in his habits. His favourite colour was white, and he mostly dressed himself in the simple home made linen, produced in his own household. His courtiers were always dressed in silk and gold cloth, but he himself seldom used any of the expensive dresses for which his court was so famous. Once a jeweller from the south brought for him a costly court awning ; it was made of gold cloth and was studded with pearls, rubies, emeralds, and other precious stones. The awning was ordered to be set up in the court hall, Scarcely had he taken his seat under it, when he fell down on his knees on the ground and asked the attendants to remove the awning from over his head. "The one-eyed Ranjit Singh is not worthy of such things. It should be sent to Amritsar as a gift to the Guru", he cried with tears, and the awning was sent to the Golden Temple. It is still there and is exhibited on important occasions.

The Chief Sikh virtue is humility. Ranjit Singh might have one thousand and one faults, but he was certainly one of the most humble of mankind. He was lord of the whole of the Punjab ; none in India was at the time as strong as he was. The rulers of Persia, Turkey, France, England and Russia vied with each other to win his favour and do him honour. But never for

was the vein of his achievements. His favourite epithet for himself was, "One-eyed". On those children who called him "Kana", one-eyed, he would shower gold and silver.

However late he might go to bed, he would always rise up early in the morning between three and four. Immediately he would have his morning bath and then go to the private chapel where musicians chanted sacred hymns from the Holy Granth. Humbly he would bow his head on the ground and pray to God to grant him purity of mind and humility of heart. "Man Niwan Mat Uchi". He would always begin his day's work with this prayer.

Near the end of his life, when his glory had reached its zenith, he went to the Golden Temple at Amritsar to pay his respects to the Guru. The Akali priests were angry with him because he had just before transgressed social rules. Baba Phula Singh, the chief of the priests, denounced the Maharaja in the open assembly as if he was one of the worst criminals. The Maharaja heard all abuse patiently. Silently he stood before the audience; with folded hands he begged them to be forgiven. The priests decided that before they could ask grace for him he should accept to be flogged as punishment; he should receive hundred stripes on his naked body before the public.

Ranjit Singh did not wince from the ordeal; gladly he agreed to undergo the punishment. He undressed

himself and offered his hand to be tied down to the trunk of a tamarind tree that stood proudly in the wing of the Akal Takhat. When Ranjit Singh stood thus naked before the public, the hearts of all those who stood around were melted. Even Baba Phulla Singh, the chief priest, though so harsh and blunt, could not punish a man with such an humble heart. Phula Singh pleaded for the Maharaja before the public. "Khalsaji! the Maharaja has agreed to accept the punishment that you decided to inflict upon him; but he is after all the King of the Sikhs; we should do honour to his position; it would do if he were given only one nominal stripe on his back as a token of his submission to the majesty of social law?" The whole of the assembly acclaimed the decision with a shout of joy; tears flowed from their eyes as from a pent up pool.

The Maharaja was united from the tree; in gratitude he bowed his head before Baba Phulla Singh. A few months later Baba Phulla Singh died near Attack fighting for the Maharaja.

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